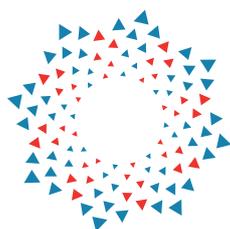


IVCO 2021 THINK PIECE

Hierarchies of Place & Knowledge in Volunteering for Development

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A key finding from [Forum's recent research on COVID-19 and the future of volunteering for development](#) was the increasing recognition of national and community volunteers within IVCOs' programming. This was an existing movement within research and practice with calls to recognise where most development volunteering happens, which is within countries and communities in the Global South. Undoubtedly, COVID-19 has accelerated the recognition of national and community volunteers within development due to their continued presence and work when international volunteers were either repatriated or programmes were discontinued or had their funding cut. In this short piece I am focusing on Forum's research recommendation to recognise national and community volunteers and adequately resource them. I aim to draw attention to the knowledge hierarchies that often get attached to the place-based categorisation of volunteers – "international", "national", and "community" – and the inequalities that produce them.

In development, geographic labels have a history of mapping onto knowledge hierarchies, [reflecting the colonial origins and structural racism of the development system](#). Despite efforts to move beyond such distinctions through increasing Global South leadership and direct funding to partner organisations, these hierarchies of place and knowledge persist. Those who are defined as community-based are working for the development of their own communities and their knowledge is often seen as local, relevant to the context of the community they are operating in. As such, community volunteers are brokers for ensuring development projects are designed and delivered with an understanding of the local context. National volunteers are defined by a broader knowledge base, but their knowledge is still often defined by their country context, which they are only able to move beyond when they gain experience volunteering or working in another country. These place-based hierarchies map onto differences in resourcing, support, and duty of care.

International and national volunteers can receive a substantial stipend, healthcare support and other benefits, whereas community volunteers often do not receive this type of support. In the [case studies accompanying Forum's recent research](#), it was shown that during COVID-19 some organisations cut community volunteers' stipends whilst maintaining those for national professional roles. In an example from my own research in Sierra Leone during a meeting between an international UN Volunteer and members of community-based organisations, a discussion arose about what support volunteers needed to carry out their work. The UN Volunteer said that being a volunteer meant having no expectations about any benefits attached to doing the work. A member of a community organisation disagreed and said that volunteers should be provided with what is necessary to carry out their work, just as the UN volunteer was provided with accommodation and support to do his work, community volunteers should be provided with food, water and transportation to support them to do theirs.

These hierarchies of knowledge and resources within volunteering reflect work in development more broadly. I was talking to a colleague recently who told me that as a national employee of a development agency in his country he can only be paid at a national level, whereas if he moved to a neighbouring country, he would be an international employee and receive a much higher salary and benefits package. Conversely, a UK national working in an African country admitted they earned far more working there than they would at home due to the benefits package offered to them. These anecdotal examples of employment within development are reflective of a deep-rooted [dual salary system that needs to be dismantled](#). Inequalities within development employment are of relevance to volunteering when we consider the [complex interaction between volunteering, remuneration and livelihoods within the sector](#).

There is a growing movement towards southern leadership of IVCOs and development agendas and an increase in focus on South-South volunteering models forming part of the decolonisation and localisation reckoning within the development and humanitarian space. However, these shifts alone do not necessarily overcome the place-based hierarchies in knowledge and access to resources outlined above, especially when it is community volunteers who face the most barriers in moving beyond their place-based designation and having their knowledge recognised as relevant beyond the place they are defined by.

Whilst spending time with community volunteers working on a development project in Sierra Leone as part of my PhD research, I was struck by a sense that in focusing on the local knowledge of community volunteers their expertise was stuck in their community setting. As members of one community spoke at a meeting about the challenges they were facing in terms of lack of access to healthcare and inadequate infrastructure, they showed how these problems were produced by national and global inequalities. The question IVCOs need to be asking is how they can recognise inequalities defined by place without reproducing long-standing hierarchies of knowledge that lead to those with more mobility and resources producing universal knowledge while those who are defined by their locale provide community context. The knowledge of volunteers who never leave their country or community is global knowledge in terms of the critiques, challenges and answers it poses to national and global inequities.